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Environmental impact study of federal Columbia River system released

Columbia River System Operation Review

Joint news release:

**U.S. Department of Energy, Bonneville Power Administration
U.S. Department of the Army, Corps of Engineers, North Pacific Division
U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Reclamation, Pacific Northwest Region**

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PORTLAND, Ore. - The final report of the System Operation Review, an environmental impact study of the federal Columbia River system, was released today. The SOR, which took five years to complete, was conducted jointly by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and the Bonneville Power Administration. The Corps operates 12 and Reclamation operates two of the 14 Columbia River system federal hydro projects that were the focus of the study. BPA markets the power generated at these projects.

The purpose of the SOR was to develop a system operating strategy and a regional forum for allowing interested parties, other than the three agencies, a long-term role in system planning. A system operating strategy defines guidelines and a general approach for river operations.

"The SOR was an historic study," said Major General Russell L. Fuhrman, commander of the Corps' North Pacific Division. "This marks the first time that the federal Columbia River system has been reviewed comprehensively rather than on a project-by-project basis."

Another goal of the SOR was to provide the environmental analysis needed for the federal agencies to sign new agreements for coordinating power generation and for allocating the return of Canadian Entitlement power to Canada among federal and non-federal parties. Canadian Entitlement power is based on the Columbia River Treaty and refers to Canada's 50 percent share of the increase in energy and capacity resulting from three Canadian reservoirs (Duncan, Keenleyside and Mica) and Libby Dam in Montana.

The river has been labeled "a system under stress." Economic interest, such as

industry, agriculture, power and recreation depend on Columbia River water, as do fish and wildlife. The agencies took the unprecedented step of collaborating on a detailed analysis of the many uses of the federally managed river system.

Developing a system operating strategy required analysis of all the major uses of the river system, flood control, navigation, power generation, fish survival, recreation and irrigation. The listing of Snake River sockeye and chinook under the Endangered Species Act in 1991 and subsequent court decisions focused increased attention on restoration of salmon stocks. The preferred system operating strategy described in the Final EIS, reflects, with minor variations, the operations outlined in the 1995 Biological Opinions issued by the National Marine Fisheries Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. But the 450-page Final EIS and its 20 appendixes totaling over 6,000 pages addresses much more than salmon restoration.

"The economic, environmental, social and political pressures that gave rise to the SOR continue to influence river operations," said John Keys, northwest regional director for the Bureau of Reclamation. "Consideration of the uses of the Columbia River system is a work in progress in which regional stakeholders will continue to be involved."

The SOR used an extensive public involvement process. Four series of public meetings were held throughout the region during the course of the study.

"We heard a wide range of views about how the river system should be managed," said Randy Hardy, BPA Administrator. "Ultimately, decisions about the stewardship of the region's natural resources must incorporate the broad context of views of all stakeholders."

The release of the Final Environmental Impact Statement will be followed by a 30-day no-action period. The agencies may then publish one or more records of decision describing actions which affect river operation and are based on the SOR Final EIS.

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